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## Old Bremerton Gasworks Site Contains Hot Spots of Pollution

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### BREMERTON

Heavy concentrations of cancer-causing chemicals have been discovered underground at an old industrial site between Pennsylvania and Thompson avenues in West Bremerton.

The 3.7-acre site, at the edge of Port Washington Narrows, has been under study for potential development, but a new round of chemical test results are needed before plans can proceed. One of the big questions is whether any of the dangerous chemicals have leaked into Puget Sound.

There are no obvious human exposures to the cancer-causing chemicals, but further studies are being done.

Experts suspect that the worst compounds were spilled from a coal-gasification plant that operated at the Bremerton site from the 1930s into the 1950s. Similar plants across the United States have been responsible for the deposition of extremely toxic chemicals — and cleanup frequently runs into many millions of dollars.

"According to consultants I have been able to talk to, coal sludge is not something you want to dig up if it's not going anywhere," said Trip McConkey, whose father, Paul, purchased much of the coal-gasification site years ago. "What I understand is that we either have a huge problem — in that the coal goop is going into the Sound — or it is going nowhere because it is covered with six inches of asphalt."

Gasification plants, which turned coal into a gas used for heating and lighting, were known to produce a group of chemicals called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs. Some PAHs are believed to cause cancer in humans.

In one location at the Old Bremerton Gasworks site, the total concentration of cancer-causing PAHs in the soil was 155 milligrams per kilogram. That's 1,555 times higher than the state cleanup standard of 0.1 milligrams per kilogram, according to a summary of findings in a preliminary report by GeoEngineers, a Seattle consulting firm.

That "hot spot" is a location where a "gas holder column" once stored the coal gas for pipeline distribution.

Other locations appeared to have less PAHs. They ranged from 77.7 milligrams per kilogram — 777 times higher than state cleanup standards — down to practically nothing.

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Besides the coal-gasification plant, various portions of the property were used for fuel-oil and gasoline storage; sandblasting, painting and electroplating; and salvage operations. Underground fuel pipelines traversed the property.

Chemicals associated with gasoline were reported as high as 645 milligrams per kilogram, or 221 times higher than state cleanup standards.

Joanne LaBaw of the Environmental Protection Agency has been supervising studies at the site. She said she is waiting for further results — including samples of sediments along the shoreline — before drawing any conclusions. She expects those results in a few weeks. She'll then write up her own summary report and review the findings with Bremerton city officials as well as toxics experts from the Washington Department of Ecology.

Studies began as a \$200,000 "brownfields" investigation for the city of Bremerton. The study was designed to consider what it would take to clean up the site and turn it to a productive use, such as a marina and public park.

The EPA continued the study with separate funding. Further work may be required to determine the extent of the contamination, which may go well beyond the 3.7 acres. Former petroleum facilities in the area may be additional sources of pollution.

Phil Williams, Bremerton's public works director, said he is especially interested in hearing about potential cleanup options.

"Hopefully, it will be a practical package," Williams said. "I hope it will suggest something that will allow future development of the upland portion of the site."

If Bremerton acquired the property, the city would be eligible for cleanup funding totaling 50 percent of the cost or more.

McConkey said his family would be amenable to just about any option, whether the city takes over the property or the McConkeys eventually operate a business on the site. Bremerton resident Natacha Sesko owns an adjacent site.

"Nobody wants this cleaned up more than me," McConkey said, adding that he appreciates how the city, EPA and Ecology are working together to solve the pollution problem, since it could bankrupt his family business.

McConkey said he has talked to numerous experts about what might be needed to clean up the site.

"Nobody can give me any idea of a dollar amount," he said.

Another player that could contribute to the cost is Cascade Natural Gas Corp., which acquired the coal-gasification plant from Western Gas Company in the early 1950s and operated it for a short time. At the time, natural gas was just arriving in Bremerton, and Cascade needed pipelines for distribution, according to company spokesman Larry Rosok.

"We know we are involved," he said. "We owned the property at one time. We sold the property in 1972 ... and we know that area in general has a long history of industrial uses."

Like everyone else, Cascade is waiting for additional studies to find out what comes next.

Larry Altose, spokesman for Ecology, said the Old Bremerton Gasworks site has been listed as a Puget Sound Initiative project, meaning it has been given priority in the effort to clean up Puget Sound.

"This site has our attention," Altose said, "If EPA wasn't working on it, we would have picked it up."

Under state law, Ecology is required to track down the entire plume of pollution, he said. It could turn out that Ecology could take over the site cleanup or work with the EPA in trying to develop the property for public use.

Similar gasworks sites include the Tacoma Tarpits on Thea Foss Waterway and Gas Works Park on Seattle's Lake Union.

"This is an important site," Altos said of Bremerton Gasworks, "and there's every reason to expect fairly serious contamination."

For a discussion about water-related issues, check out the blog [Watching Our Water Ways](http://www.kitsapsun.com/blog/watching-our-water-ways) at kitsapsun.com.



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